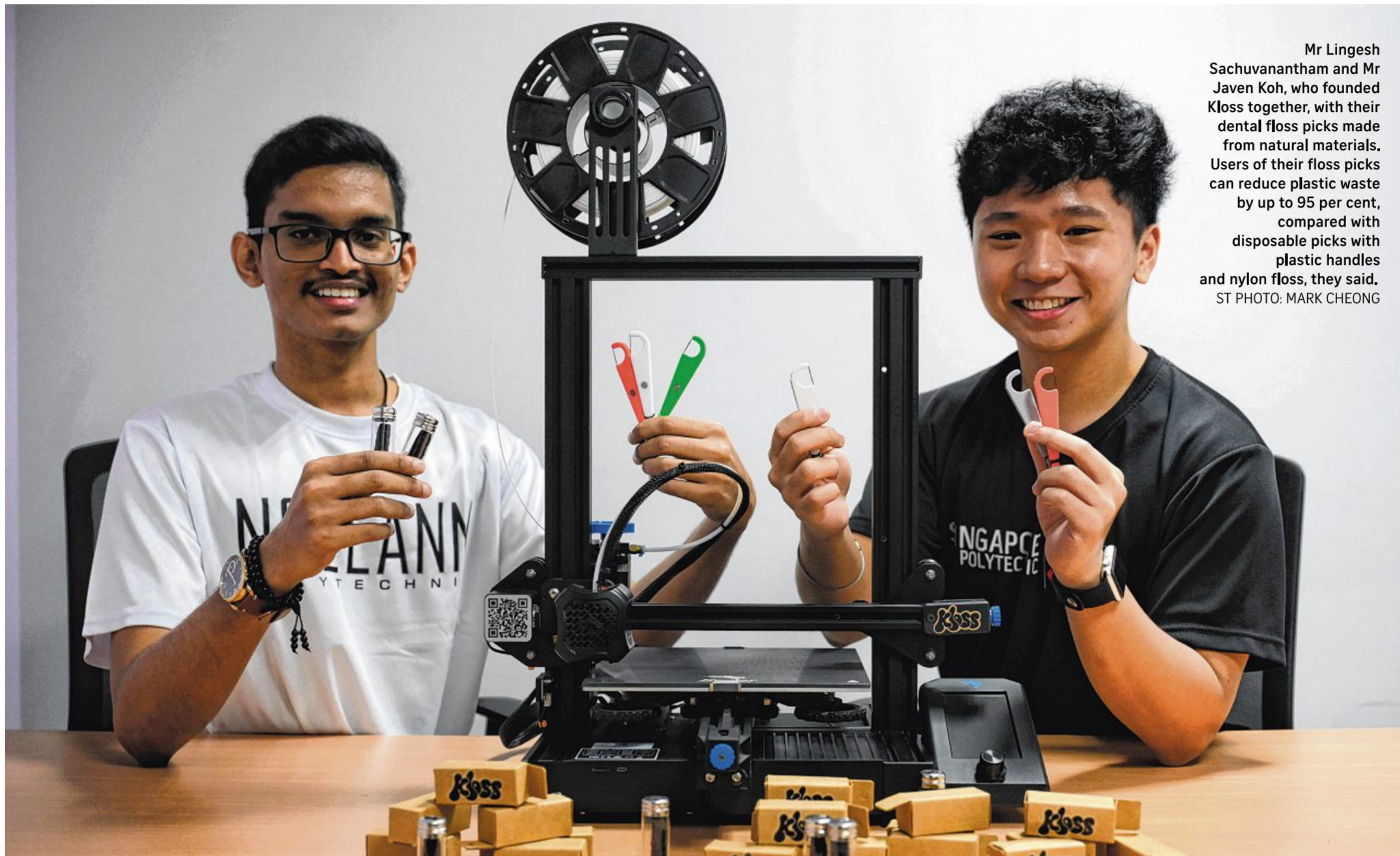


The start-up scene is packed with flashy funding announcements, but what really goes on behind the glitz and glamour? In this series, The Straits Times sits down with founders to learn how they developed their ideas, and what it takes to ride the roller coaster of entrepreneurship.

They defy odds to create eco-friendly floss picks



Mr Lingesh Sachuvaranatham and Mr Javen Koh, who founded Kloss together, with their dental floss picks made from natural materials. Users of their floss picks can reduce plastic waste by up to 95 per cent, compared with disposable picks with plastic handles and nylon floss, they said. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Their top 3 tips for aspiring young entrepreneurs

- 1 Utilise support from your schools, especially if you are a student entrepreneur.
- 2 Let your experiences along the way shape your business plans. Even without proper training, you can still take the plunge and enter a market.
- 3 Young entrepreneurs have the luxury of age and time – do not listen to unconstructive criticisms and do not be afraid to constantly fail because that is how you learn.

ROUGH START

In the beginning, when we had almost no funding, it was a lot of trial and error. I remember we tried using the 3D printer for 'mass production'... it printed about 20 handles before it caught fire.



MR JAVEN KOH,
co-founder of Kloss.

Timothy Goh

Unlike many other polytechnic students who call it a day after slogging through their homework, Mr Lingesh Sachuvaranatham and Mr Javen Koh would continue to stay up – to tackle a thumb-size problem found in toilet bins.

Dental floss picks, they propose, should be made from recyclable and biodegradable materials, as they are major contributors to plastic waste in landfills here and globally.

“We thought of creating eco-friendly toothbrushes, but there are too many alternatives in the market, so we chose to focus on floss picks instead – it’s something that’s often overlooked because we just throw them away after use... it’s an everyday problem,” said Mr Sachuvaranatham, 19, a business student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

In 2022, he and Mr Koh, 20, founded Kloss after their idea of biodegradable and reusable floss picks clinched the second prize at the School Sustainability Challenge by Junior Achievement Singapore.

“The way we came up with the name really isn’t that artistic – we just started spurting out gibberish: ‘Bloss’, ‘Doss’, ‘Gloss’... that’s how we came up with Kloss,” said Mr Sachuvaranatham.

With the prize money of \$3,000, they bought a 3D printer at \$220 and plunged right into the start-up world.

Kloss’ dental floss picks are made from natural materials.

The handle is 3D-printed using polylactic acid, a biodegradable material derived from organic sources like corn starch and sugar cane, and the China-sourced floss is made from bamboo and charcoal fibres, which are biodegradable.

After the floss pick is used, it can be reused with new floss wound around the sturdy handles.

Users can reduce plastic waste by up to 95 per cent, compared with disposable picks with plastic handles and nylon floss, according to Mr Sachuvaranatham and Mr Koh.

Mr Koh, who is pursuing a diploma in maritime business at Singapore Polytechnic, said: “We are trying to provide an eco-friendly alternative without sacrificing hygiene, offering a simple but effective way to reduce environmental impact.”

The Kloss floss pick, which comes with a six-month supply of floss, costs \$10. It is available for sale on Kloss’ website.

“In the beginning, when we had almost no funding, it was a lot of trial and error. I remember we tried using the 3D printer for ‘mass production’... it printed about 20 handles before it caught fire,” said Mr Koh.

The young entrepreneurs also had conflicting school schedules and no proper place to work on their budding business – their homes were too far from each other for them to work in either place.

Mr Koh said: “I live in Bukit Batok, while Lingesh lives in Kovan... so we held our meetings online or met in person at odd spots, like a

random park bench or in one of our schools after hours, using only the light from a vending machine to work.”

To save costs, they used one set of business cards, which bore both their names.

“We didn’t want to spend \$30 on two sets of 100 cards each... So we decided to give ourselves a 50 per cent discount, by adding both our contact details on one card, side by side,” said Mr Koh.

Investors were also sceptical about their idea due to their young age and lack of business experience.

Mr Sachuvaranatham said: “We actually received incredibly ridiculous offers – someone once offered us \$10 to buy our entire business, which was admittedly funny but also rather insulting.”

He added: “The way we handled the questions and criticisms was with concrete facts and figures that we collated ourselves.”

To date, Kloss has sold about 200 dental floss picks, primarily at pop-up events.

It may seem like a small number, but Mr Sachuvaranatham and Mr Koh are not disappointed as it has been “more of a test run” so far for them.

Within the next year, they want to sell 120,000 picks, a target they plan to meet with the expansion of Kloss’ sales channels via dental clinics and pharmacies.

Since winning the sustainability contest prize money and putting in hundreds of dollars of their own money into Kloss, they have secured approximately \$30,000 in non-equity funding from Singapore Polytechnic, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, and the #OCBCCares Environment Fund. They are also seeking another \$50,000 to expand its business.

The young start-up recently upgraded its equipment – its old, 3D printer that went up in flames has been replaced with 15 advanced models supplied by an R&D firm, which are used exclusively for prototyping and design.

It has also set up a temporary office at Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s start-up incubator, Sandbox, which currently handles most of Kloss’ manufacturing needs using Sandbox’s own 3D printers.

Kloss has plans to hire a contract manufacturer for full-scale production in the future.

It is also developing floss that clips directly onto the pick handles.

The team at Kloss now includes two part-time employees, who take care of design, marketing and business development. Between the founders themselves, Mr Sachuvaranatham handles finance, while Mr Koh deals with operations.

The Kloss founders – who met as schoolmates at the Institute of Technical Education, where they both studied business administration – said that being student entrepreneurs is “fun” as it allows them to directly apply what they learn in school to their business, including methods of prototyping and marketing.

Both Mr Sachuvaranatham and Mr Koh said they intend to make Kloss their full-time careers after graduation.

Mr Koh said: “We have been running Kloss for over two years now, and have recently registered it under the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority as a limited liability partnership... We really have no intention of slowing down.”

He added: “Start-up life is not for everyone, but we are willing to step out of our comfort zones – the only restriction is that there are just 24 hours in a day.”

timgohsm@sph.com.sg

